

The Arab Ear and the American Eye: A Study of the Role of the Senses in Culture

Sharif Kanaana
Birzeit University
Palestine

Translated by Ibrahim Muhawi
Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich
Germany

Abstract

This article is a translation (with a translator's preface) of an essay by Sharif Kanaana on the significance of hearing in Arab culture. The analysis is based on Alan Dundes' "Seeing is Believing." Proceeding along the same lines as Dundes and using similar procedures, the author seeks to establish the hypothesis that in Arab culture the ear is more significant than the eye as a guide to belief. While "Seeing is Believing" is about American culture, in using its categories as a basis for the study of the Arab ear, this article brings to the fore its implicit comparative perspective. The theoretical point at issue is the determining power of culturally established cognitive patterns.

The dialogue between the two articles (Kanaana's and Dundes') is an instance of intercultural communication, which could not have come into being without the decisive role of translation. The translator's preface and response explore the reciprocal discursive connection between translation and ethnography, given that both of these, as disciplines, have to grapple with the problem of

how to interpret the Other for a domestic audience. The analysis elaborates upon the metaphorical significance of the eye in Arab culture, showing that the Arab fear of the eye may be justified in view of the manipulative power that resides in images. Translated in terms of culture, it may be that the reliance on the eye breeds a need for visual stimulation and constant change, while reliance on the ear leads to reliance on tradition and fear of change.

Translator's preface

My contribution consists of three parts. The first is this introduction; the second is a translation of the better part of an article by Sharif Kanaana, and the third is my response. The original article appeared in the year 2000 in Kanaana's book on Palestinian folklore, *Min Nisi Qadimo . . . Tah!* ("He Who Forgets His Past . . . Is Lost!"). The ellipsis is part of the original title, which is a Palestinian proverb. I translated this piece not only for its cultural contribution but also because of its attempt to establish a dialogue based on shared scholarly interest, and that dialogue in turn cannot take place without translation. Therefore, the translation is itself the completing process of that dialogue. Additionally, and with respect to this dialogue, the significance of Kanaana's piece lies in its uncovering of the comparative methodological implications of the essay on which it is based, Dundes' "Seeing is Believing" (1980).

Dundes' article is based on the assumption that verbal folklore articulates or reflects world view, or both. While I think that the assumption of realistic mimesis (that is, trying to read world

view from folktales or proverbs) can, and frequently does, lead the inexperienced into aberrant views of a given culture (Orientalism being an outstanding, and pernicious, example of this process) it seems to me that the exemplary areas of behavior singled out by Dundes, and by Kanaana in turn, do lead to accurate conclusions. To cite one specific example from my own experience, as a person who belongs to a "hearing is believing" culture, I always find it disconcerting when American friends use the seeing metaphor to refer to concerts—e.g., "I saw the San Francisco Symphony last night." Though as a student of language I understand that this is American usage (and no one can argue with usage), the culturally Arab part of me still thinks that this formulation is a distortion of experience. Perhaps we can use translation metaphorically here and think of this process as a translation in terms of one sense of something that takes place primarily in the domain of another.

Turning now to the specific details of that dialogue, we note that the two articles taken together resemble a circle, or a necklace, with Kanaana beginning where Dundes left off. The points that Dundes makes in bringing his article to a close are the very ones taken up by Kanaana at the beginning of his study. In his last paragraph, Dundes specifically raises the question of the cultural relativism of language:

With human observations expressed in human language, one simply cannot avoid cultural bias. . . . Cross-cultural comparisons of sense categories may not only reveal critical differences in the specific senses, but also

whether or not the apparent priority of vision over the other senses is a human universal.

Kanaana unravels the implications of this in a number of ways: first, methodologically, by using the same categories as Dundes does to undertake a cross-cultural comparison of the senses, showing that the "apparent priority of vision over the other senses" is not a human universal. And, secondly, by placing Dundes' formulation within the context of the translation of culture, as we shall see below in more detail. With regard to the first problem, Kanaana uses the issues brought up by Dundes at the end of his essay to raise rather large philosophical questions (which he admits are impossible to answer) at the beginning of his. Thus in taking up Dundes' "challenge," by undertaking a cross-cultural comparison based on the very categories proposed by Dundes, Kanaana opens out the horizon of the discussion by showing that, if we are to avoid the Orientalist pitfalls, we must take Dundes' questions, his doubts and hesitations about the gravity of cultural misrepresentation seriously enough to be aware of their consequences in relation to Arab culture.

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Every field of knowledge has issues and problems that are appropriate to it. The issue, which I shall be addressing in this research, is of the type that usually engages anthropologists, but it has also been addressed by folklorists, sociologists, and others concerned with the social sciences.

Anthropologists see their function as the understanding of other cultures, the translation of the spirit of the cultures they study, and the transfer of the way indigenous peoples see their world and culture to the anthropologist's own world and culture. But there is always an anxiety—and therefore some contention—concerning the degree of truthfulness of what they transfer to their own culture: to what extent do anthropologists actually transfer another culture without imposing on it their own cultural perceptions?

Let us take an example. Every language is a part, or offspring, of a culture. It came into being so that members of that culture can communicate in terms of concepts and understandings appropriate to their culture. Is it therefore possible to speak of another culture in our own language? And when we do so, does that culture remain itself, or do we in the process recast it in terms of concepts appropriate to our own culture?

Let us take another example. Do the modern sciences that came into being in the West represent absolute truths or are they just expressions of modern Western culture? And when we try to arrive at an understanding of another society or culture by reference to modern Western social science, are we then not recasting it in the conceptual terms of these sciences?

The question I am addressing here is of the type dealt with by students of human culture, especially those among them who are concerned with subjects that are relevant to different cultures. We can reformulate the question as follows: Living human beings must interact with the environment in order to survive; otherwise, we would not be able to survive. Human perception of the environment takes place through the agency of the senses, which receive impressions from the environment. There is no other access to the environment except through the senses. Therefore, human beings' perception of the environment, their understanding of it, and their interactions with it depend on the five senses. So culture is the sum total of the ways humans learn to interact with the environment in order to survive. But these do not depend on the senses in equal measure, and different cultures do not utilize each of the senses to the same degree, for cultures may differ in their reliance on any particular sense. It is said, for example, that Western culture prefers the sense of sight to the other senses. The dependence of this culture on sight may reach such an extent that information available to other senses, such as touch or smell, may be ignored in favor of the sense of sight.

These considerations do not apply solely to ordinary individuals in daily life, but also to the student and the researcher, including the anthropologist, from whom we expect an understanding of the cultures s/he brings to the attention of the Western world. If it is true that the Western person depends principally on sight, then the picture that anthropologists and other students of the

Orient draw, for example, of Arab culture is bound to be doubly distorted, since these scholars are likely to highlight the features of this culture that emphasize the sense of sight, and these in turn will be perceived by Western scholars in relation to visual data as a result of their primary dependence on the sense of sight. The distortion increases if the culture under study shows a preference for one of the other senses, such as touch.

Scholars of the Orient have written thousands of books, theses, and dissertations about the Middle East, Islam, and Arab/Islamic culture. Their writings exceed by far what Arabs and Muslims have written about themselves, particularly in the modern age. Most of what the world today knows about Arab/Islamic culture, even much of what Arabs and Muslims know about themselves, has come by way of the writings of Orientalist European and American scholars.

If what we are saying is true, or at least close to the truth, and when we ourselves try to describe our culture and society in order to make them available to the rest of the world, is it not reasonable to suggest that we will find many complex features of this culture which were not perceived or discussed by Western anthropologists and Orientalists because they were not related to the sense of sight? Furthermore, is it possible that, generally speaking, the differences between cultures would depend merely on a culture's emphasis or dependence on one sense rather than another?

We will not be able to provide satisfactory answers to these questions here, but I will propose a simplified assumption,

namely, that Western culture is structurally more dependent on the sense of sight than Arab/Islamic culture, and that this culture in turn is more dependent on the sense of hearing than Western culture. I will not be able to prove this supposition, but I will try to show that it is a reasonable one, and worthy of further exploration.

In an article published in 1972 in the *Natural History Magazine*, entitled "Seeing is Believing" [reprinted in Dundes 1980], Alan Dundes discusses the significance of the sense of sight in American society. Here is the opening paragraph of this article:

Whether from early memories of playing "peek-a-boo," "showing and telling" in school, or learning the opening phrases of the national anthem—"O say can you see"—the primacy of vision in American culture is affirmed again and again as infants grow to adulthood. Americans are conditioned from childhood to believe that "what you see is what you get."

Dundes ends his article with the thought that cross-cultural "comparisons of sense categories may not only reveal critical differences in the specific senses, but also whether or not the apparent priority of vision over the other senses is a human universal." As far as I know no one has taken up the challenge posed by Dundes, and he himself has not pursued his research further, whether in relation to American or other cultures. The fact of the matter is that this is a difficult subject: it is much easier to talk about it than to study it in relation to observable in-

stances of behavior.

Dundes' article highlights those aspects of American behavior, which the author says show a clear preference for the sense of sight, and it discusses them as representative aspects of American culture as a whole. What I shall do here is proceed as Dundes does and demonstrate, with reference to some of the same practices which he maintains show a clear preference for the sense of sight, that in these and similar cases the Arab person prefers to rely on hearing or another sense altogether.

Of course, Dundes does not establish that Americans do not rely on senses other than sight in the many aspects of culture that he does not address in his essay. Similarly, if I succeed in this essay in showing that the Arab person relies more on hearing than on sight in respect to many aspects of culture treated by Dundes, this, in turn, does not establish that Arab individuals do not rely on sight or some other sense in many or even most aspects of Arab culture. I will now take some of the examples used by Dundes and explore the extent to which they apply to Arab individuals and culture.

As we can see from the quotation, Dundes mentions that a game in which adults play with infants whose age does not exceed a few months is called "peek-a-boo." Arabs play the same game with infants, saying "ba'ayni." I have had occasion to observe this game among both communities, and I came away with the impression that the element of surprise for the American child arises from the successive disappearance and reappearance of the adult face, and that the word

"peek-a-boo" does not play a large role in surprising the child, attracting his/her attention and producing laughter. While, among Arabs, the element of surprise depends to a large extent on sound, for the word "ba'ayni" is spoken in rapid rhythm and at an elevated pitch—far louder than when Americans say "peek-a-boo."

Similarly (as mentioned by Dundes) one of the initial methods of teaching American children when they enter school is called "show and tell." In this game the teacher asks each pupil to bring an item from home which s/he then shows to the other children, describing it in some detail while pointing to the parts of that item and the way it is put together and used, and such like. Education here takes place as a result of seeing and speaking. What, then, are the initial methods of education for the Arab child? Until the recent past, education took place in the small schools known as the *kuttabs*, which are run by religious sheikhs. The sheikh in these schools, or the teacher in many modern schools, begins by saying something in a loud voice, and the children repeat after him or her, also in a loud voice. This is repeated until the children learn what is being taught by heart, without any sort of visual cue or even (in most cases) without understanding the meaning of the information being communicated, regardless of whether it has to do with reading, teaching the Qur'an, poetry, or arithmetic. Thus we see that the preferred method of traditional education in Arab/Islamic culture is by means of hearing and speaking, and not by seeing and speaking, as in the West.

Parents also resort to the same method

of teaching their children from the earliest stages of childhood, before the children are admitted into kindergarten or school. The American mother teaches her child language by pointing to things and talking to the child about them, encouraging him or her to use them and discover their parts and how they work. The Arab mother, on the other hand, teaches her child language by pronouncing the words, letting the child repeat after her without pointing out the things to which the words refer. She, for example, will teach the child to repeat the names of the family members, and the names of animals and birds and the sounds that they make. She may teach the child songs, sayings, or sentences with abstract meanings, or even the numbers from one to ten without explaining what the numbers mean or without pointing to things in the process of counting. Thus, the child learns the numbers in order by heart without learning how to count tangible objects or how to use these numbers, repeating them all from one to ten when he or she hears a number or even the first sound of a number. This way of teaching children, by making the child repeat what he or she knows from hearing the very initial sound of a number, is widely used by the Arab (Palestinian) mother to show off her child and his or her cleverness in speaking to friends, neighbors, and relatives. A mother might say to her child, "Come, show daddy what you learned today!" But the child does not understand what is required and does not respond to her request. The mother then follows this up by making the first sound of what she wants the child to say, for example: "I" (Aaaaaye), and the child

continues with, "love daddy a lot." Or the mother might say, "Come, darling sing 'Allah,'" and the child continues with "lives O Abu Shusha!" Or the mother might say, "Come show us how well you can count! Come on, 'Waaaan,'" and the child would continue with "Twoooo, threeee . . ." and so on.

We note also that the Arab mother conditions her child to undertake actions or bodily movements upon hearing the auditory cues associated with these movements, without showing concern for the child's understanding of the meaning of these requests or orders. The child's response then becomes automatic upon hearing the auditory cues. The mother might say something like, "*Dah! Dah!*" and the baby would make a movement with its hands, which the mother explains as a form of dancing. Or she might say, "*Heedo, Heedo!*" and the infant would attempt to stand up. Or she might say, "*Daadee, Daadee!*" and the child would start moving its feet as if to walk.

Dundes says that American culture relies on the sense of sight so much that Americans perceive the world around them through this sense. We might therefore say, metaphorically, that Americans see the world around them but do not hear, touch, smell, or taste it. This orientation to the world is illustrated in daily expressions. Let us observe how Dundes does this, and whether or not it, or something different, would apply to the Arab individual. Thus, the American, Dundes says, uses sight metaphorically to express understanding in such expressions as "I see" or "as I see it." Americans in general express their understanding of any idea by saying that they "see" it. For

Arabs, this use of "seeing" is comprehensible, but they do not need to use the sense of sight metaphorically. If for some reason a person had to resort to using the senses to express an understanding of something, then hearing would serve the purpose as well as, or better than, seeing. For one to say, "I hear what you're saying," meaning "I understand what you mean," would be more acceptable and in greater accordance with common usage than saying, "I see what you mean." But in either case, it would be preferable to say, "I understand what you're saying." On the other hand, if we want to make sure that the person whom we are addressing understands our meaning, the question, "Do you hear me?" is more appropriate than, "Do you see what I'm saying." "Do you understand what I'm saying?" would be most appropriate of all.

Americans, Dundes also says, are empiricists, and their empiricism favors the sense of sight more than the other senses. Americans do not trust or become convinced of anything until after they have "seen." Once they "see," that, in itself, is sufficient and there will be no need for further proof by means of the other senses. Americans say, "Seeing is believing" or "I saw it with my own eyes," asking others to "see for themselves." When an American doubts the veracity of what is said s/he might say, "That I've got to see." On the other hand, the Arab's trust of the sense of sight is, in my view, far less than that of the American because the Arab casts doubt on appearances, which may be deceiving. If an Arab wants to make sure of the veracity of what is being said s/he might say, "I

heard it with my own ears," or "His words stuck in my ears." If an Arab, for example, were to doubt the truth of what is being said, s/he might ask the interlocutor to confirm what had been said, by giving his or her "word" that it is true. If s/he wants to go further, s/he might request the other person to verify what was said "on your honor (*sharaf* or *dhimma*);" or s/he might ask him to swear in the name of God, or on the Qur'an. But s/he will not insist on "seeing with his/her own eyes" because "only a shit[head]—*il-khara*—does not believe until s/he sees."

The difference in dependence on the different senses between Arabs and Americans comes out clearly in relation to shopping. Americans hesitate before buying something "sight unseen." Before buying something they may wish to "look it over," but they would not normally touch the merchandise or examine it with any of the other senses. An American shopkeeper may have a negative reaction to a customer's touching the merchandise, and if the buyer were to try tasting or smelling it, that would be considered unacceptable, especially if the merchandise comes already wrapped. True, an Arab will not buy "fish in the sea," but when the fish is put in front of him/her what does the Arab person do? It is certain s/he will reach out with his/her hand, feel it, and turn several fishes over before finally picking one, lifting it up, and turning it around, making sure to press its flesh, smell it, and examine its eyes and gills. This will continue until the customer picks what s/he wants. It may be thought that all this is necessary because fish spoil quickly, but Ar-

abs will do this with everything, even prepared foods. They do not find it embarrassing to touch the merchandise, feel it with their hands, and frequently even taste it. If the merchandise is of the type that can emit some kind of sound, then the Arab will try to get a sound out of it by shaking it, thumping it, or tapping the fingers on its surface. A watermelon, for example, which the American might not assume would emit any sounds, might be lifted up between the Arab's palms, brought close to his/her ear, and pressed with his/her palms in order to listen to sounds inside it. It might not be bought until a large number had been similarly checked.

Because Americans depend largely on sight for evaluating an item of merchandise, there now exists in the United States a huge packaging industry that costs the American consumer billions of dollars a year. The purpose behind packaging is to make the item appear better and bigger than it in fact is. I do not believe that packaging would be equally successful among Arabs. An Arab consumer faced with a packaged product is likely to squeeze the box, shake it, bend it, or (often) even empty it.

In his article, Dundes also uses as evidence expressions from tourism. Americans travel for the purpose of "sight-seeing" as they move at top speed from one town to another in order to see the greatest number of places and document their experience with photographs. They rarely enjoy their travels as they should because they are oriented towards looking, making no effort to get acquainted with local people, or to enjoy the unaccustomed smells of a place, its cuisine,

or music. According to Dundes, this emphasis on seeing the maximum number of places is based on the notion of quantity, or getting the best deal for the money spent on any particular activity.

Some medical expressions also support the emphasis in American culture on seeing, where patients wait for the doctor to "see them," as if doctors treat people by sight. In Arabic we say that a doctor examines (*yafhu*) or "uncovers" (*yakshif ala*) the patient, or may even "feel" (*yahiss, ya'iss*) or take the pulse of (*yajiss*) of the patient. A doctor may even write out a prescription upon hearing a description of the patient's symptoms from a relative, but it would not be acceptable for a doctor to prescribe medicine upon merely seeing the patient. We frequently hear people complaining about a doctor because "s/he doesn't do an examination, but writes a prescription after seeing the patient." Doctors who examine different parts of the patient's body and who ask a lot of questions and are willing to discuss the sick person's condition are preferred.

According to Dundes, Americans depend on sight to evaluate not only a person who is in their presence but also an absent one, based on his or her "public image," while for the Arab, the other person is judged according to reputation, that is what one hears other people say about them. Furthermore, Americans understand not only the present with reference to the sense of sight, but the future as well. Americans will go to a "seer" who looks into the unknown in an effort to find out what is hidden in that person's future, whereas the Arab will go to the "knower" (*'arrafi*) who knows

what is hidden, or to an "opener" (*fattah*) who will unlock the gates of the unknown.

Finally, Dundes says that Americans relate to each other through sight, because they normally prefer not to touch or be touched, except in a love- or sexual relationship. Meeting after long absence is usually accompanied by an exchange of greetings, or when relations are warm a mere handshake. Further, most of what is said during the exchange of greetings has to do with sight, such as, "It's good to see you," "See you later," or "I'll be seeing you," and so on. The Arab greeting, on the other hand, even among men, might involve embracing and kissing on the cheek. A person returning after a long absence or coming out of prison may be hugged and kissed ten or twenty times. Young men are not embarrassed to walk down the street holding hands or with their arms around each other's shoulders. Dundes mentions that there are no American expressions praising those who rely on the sense of smell, taste, or hearing, while we Arabs have good things to say about a person who listens (literally, "someone who hears the word") and we praise a person who has taste: our proverbs say, "The smell of a husband is better than having none," or "The smell of a mother brings [the family] together." When American youths see a beautiful girl walking down the street, one might say to the other, "Look, but don't touch," while the Arab youth will whisper in his friend's ear, "Smell, but don't taste."

In this essay, I have presented a number of perspectives that show differences between Arabs and Americans regard-

ing the degree of dependence on the various senses. While it does not constitute proof of the thesis, I believe it is sufficient to persuade researchers that it is valid and merits serious investigation.

Work Cited

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Responses

Ear and Eye in Cultural Dialogue

Ibrahim Muhawi

*Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich
Germany*

First, a few words about translation. This is a fluent, literal translation that stays as close to the original text as possible without sacrificing readability. I have omitted some material that would be redundant to American readers, given that Kanaana is explaining their culture (as propounded by Dundes) to an Arab audience.

Another point that arises directly from the act of translation is the question of gender. While translating, I became conscious that the attempt to get away from exclusive reliance on male-oriented language-use was often awkward, not necessarily in terms of sentence structure (although it is true that structures like "s/he" or "him/her" could ruin the rhythm of a sentence—a risk I am willing to take for the sake of balancing the habitual orientation toward the masculine/male gender in writing), but in terms of the actual roles played by women in the respective spheres discussed by the authors. This reflection is perhaps more applicable to the American scene, and I wonder to what extent the "seeing is believing" attitude reflects a macho orientation towards the world: I am that much more of a man than you are, and I exercise my power over you by refusing to believe what you say and by making you "show me." Seeing, after

all, is a form of power. Some prisons are designed in such a way that guards can see the prisoners at all times. In the UK, there are CCTV cameras practically everywhere, and their use is increasing in the USA as well. In practically every American home there is a TV, and it would seem that most people are perfectly convinced that it is they who have power over the TV because they can switch channels (or turn it off), when, in fact, they are passive recipients of the TV image, which holds them in thrall and manipulates their visual field in quite violent ways that they have no way of controlling.

Remaining with the topic of translation for a moment, Dundes raises the issue of the categories used by Western anthropologists to describe other cultures: "If we are truly interested in how other people perceive reality, we must recognize their cognitive categories and escape the confines of our own" (1980a, 91). Kanaana raises the same issue, seeing it from the perspective of what is called "cultural translation" (though he does not pursue the "translational" side of the question). Yengoyan, in a way, makes translation the central theme of anthropology: "Translation and the tensions in translation have always plagued anthropology, be it in its scientific version or humanistic side, with the persistent question of how cultural translations can be made without destroying the very subjects which we are trying to convey" (2003, 25). The title of the book containing Yengoyan's article is *Translating Cultures*. Many years prior to its publication, in 1986, *Writing Cultures* began to grapple

with the textualization of culture and its translation. Here I can do no more than refer to Crapanzano, who sees translation as the central metaphor behind the entire ethnographic enterprise:

The ethnographer is caught in a second paradox. He has to make sense of the foreign. Like Benjamin's translator, he aims at a solution to the problem of foreignness, and like the translator . . . he must also communicate the very foreignness that his interpretations (the translator's translations) deny, at least in their claim to universality. He must render the foreign familiar and preserve its very foreignness at the same time. The translator accomplishes this through style, the ethnographer through the coupling of a presentation that asserts the foreign and an interpretation that makes it all familiar. (Crapanzano 1986, 52)

This coupling of the translator's and the ethnographer's tasks in the similarity of their intentions is quite apt (with a reservation about the validity of the assertion about style). If translation is the central problem of ethnography, by the same token ethnography is the (unacknowledged) central issue in translation studies. Recently, Venuti encapsulated this question as the basic theoretical issue in translation studies, in the polar terms of foreignization and domestication (1995, 20-24). This debate, of course, goes back to 1813, with the appearance of Schleiermacher's *Methoden des Übersetzens*, where he articulated the alternatives open to the translator in the following terms: "Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as pos-

sible and moves the reader toward the writer [i.e., foreignization] or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader [domestication]" (1992, 42). In one way or another, linguistic differences between source and target texts can be overcome; what cannot be overcome, however, is the cultural difference. The irreconcilable polarity holds in both disciplines, with culture remaining at the center: either the translator makes a native out of the reader, or he makes a compatriot out of the foreign author.

I would like to conclude with some general reflections on points arising from the discussion. First, it is clear that the dialogue between the eye and the ear can make a significant contribution to the prevailing discourse on the presumed split between orality and literacy. I agree with Kanaana that the Arab people tend to trust information received by the ear. This is borne out by my personal experience while teaching in Jordan, Palestine, and Tunisia. Despite handouts explaining due dates, exam times, and deadlines, many students always wanted to have verbal confirmation of the information. Yet, at the same time, Muslim Arabs consider themselves (as well as Christians and Jews) people of the book. The Qur'an was orally revealed; the very word Qur'an means "that which is recited." The Prophet's analphabetism is a firmly held belief among Muslims, yet the Qur'an's status as a book, as *the* book, seems to blur the difference between the oral and the written: one sanctifies the other. There is a need for research from an Arab/Islamic understanding on "oral-

ity" and "literacy." Dundes' recent book, *Fables of the Ancients: Folklore in the Qur'an* (2003), is a first point of departure for anyone undertaking such an inquiry. Though it does not address itself directly to the orality/literacy theory, it does show (incontrovertibly) the oral-formulaic structure of the Qur'anic text.

A second point that occurs to me in the debate between the ear and the eye is the Arab mistrust of the eye, which is not perceived as being simply an organ of sight but a symbol of desire and of the soul. If one were to choose an Arab person at random, throw the word "eye" at her/him, and ask what immediately comes to mind, I would be willing to bet that the majority would say "evil." The response to the "eye" in Arab culture goes beyond mistrust to fear. The eye is feared, I think, because it is perceived (as I mentioned above) that the gaze has power, and that power, in the form of envy, can cause harm (see in this regard the magisterial essay on the evil eye, Dundes 1980b.)

The gaze of the other is perceived to be too powerful to resist. This is the sense in which I was referring to the TV in the living room—as the gaze of a commercial other whose purpose is to turn the audience into passive consumers of advertisements, products, and propaganda. In American culture, there is a saturation of images. In the home, on the subway, on the bus, wherever you turn your head, it is impossible to get away from them. The only freedom from this saturation is blindness. It is precisely because, as Dundes says, the eye is perceived to be powerful that the belief system of those doubting Thomases—the

American public—who think they have access to the truth because they can see, can be very subtly manipulated by the simple technique of manipulating the image to which they are exposed without their ever suspecting it. In fact, though images are manipulated consciously all the time (and not always for a sinister purpose) I think that, by directing the gaze, the very essence of the image is manipulation. The TV masters who control what the American public sees are doing no more than working with the potential that already exists in the process of making an image.

The fear of the power of the eye may lie behind the Arab custom of offering as a gift any item of clothing or jewelry that has been openly admired by another person. Even asking about the cost of a new garment is potentially harmful. In Tunisia, for example, the figure given in response to such a question always includes the number five. That, of course, is the pentangle, the Hand of Fatima, which wards off the evil eye. Iconographically, the eye is frequently painted inside an open palm (the Hand of Fatima), and the purpose of the magic number five, as well as the open palm pointing upwards in a gesture of "Stop!" is to surround the eye and contain it.

The eye is not only a symbol of the soul, it also stands as the basic metaphor for desire. A common saying at our dinner table (four children and two adults) was, "The stomach doesn't get full; it's the eye that feels fullness." There are many other proverbs that confirm this fact, but it is sufficient to cite just one more, which I heard frequently as a child—a profound statement about life

and death: "Nothing fills the eye of a human being like a handful of dirt."

In bringing this discussion to an end, I cannot help wondering about the extent to which reliance on eye or ear makes one society innovative and the other traditional. The emphasis on newness in American culture is, I think, attributable to the constant stimulation needed by the eye in order to be satisfied. Unlike Arabs, Americans seem to believe that the eye *can* be satisfied, and the result of course is the glut of images to keep the eye happy. Reliance on the ear, on the other hand, seems to encourage conventionality and tradition, which is transmitted in an oral-formulaic manner, whether through fixed expressions like proverbs, sayings, religious dicta, or by narrative motifs and conventional behavior. True, the emphasis on newness is oppressive to the individual and certainly detrimental to the self-image of Americans gullible enough to want to reinvent their identities in terms of the images they encounter daily. Yet, equally oppressive is the Arab emphasis on tradition. The very title of Kanaana's book says it all: *He Who Forgets His Past . . . Is Lost!* True, the reliance on tradition has certainly helped the Palestinian people to maintain their identity in their places of exile. Yet at the same time this dependence on tradition and the fear of innovation, aside from its detrimental effect on individual freedom, has certainly been a major factor in the current Arab social, political, and cultural stagnation. The sad fact is that there seems to be no culture that has embodied a healthy synthesis of both those perspectives. You get either stagnation or globalization.

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Viewing, Shaking, Smelling, and Listening to Melons

Regina Bendix
Universität Göttingen
Germany

Translation has, in the course of the past decade, risen to be a central concept both in anthropological thinking and in thinking about anthropology. The *Anthropology News* made it its core theme for the 2002–03 cycle, numerous stimulating article collections have been published, and the marginalized field of translation studies, or at least one of its central theorists, Lawrence Venuti, have received sudden respect. Attention to the notion of translation is in many ways the logical continuation of the "writing culture" movement. Ibrahim Muhawi has himself explored the topic of translation (e.g., Muhawi 2000) and it is thus all the more fitting that Muhawi offers here an example of how the translator's customary invisibility (cf. Venuti 1995) can be counteracted in order to facilitate dialogue both with the author as well as with the readership in the target language. Muhawi spells out his intentions as a translator as well as his own reactions and additions as a folklorist to Sharif Kanaana's piece. The reader is thus in possession of a great deal more to respond to than if she had simply received a translation.

Given the foregrounding of the translation process in what is, in effect, a double-voiced contribution by author-scholar Kanaana and translator-author-scholar Muhawi, it may be fitting to begin with an account on the many layers

of "carrying over"—for that is the literal meaning of translation—involved in the present piece. In cognitive terms, scholarly endeavor entails numerous processes that can be likened to "translation" in as much as observations, interpretations, and a combination of individual knowledge contexts flow into the crafting of new propositions. The central argument proposed by Sharif Kanaana—cultures privilege different senses in enculturation and in communicating core values—takes its beginning from Alan Dundes' 1972 article "Seeing is Believing" (Dundes 1980). In terms of anthropological theorizing of translation, we thus begin with Alan Dundes' "translation" of ethnographic and archival evidence into scholarly analysis resulting in the said article. Then follows Sharif Kanaana's reading and "translating" of Dundes' propositions into his own linguistic and scholarly tradition. He "translates" his cursory and preliminary accounting of comparable Arabic phrases and proverbs as well as enculturating behaviors into a depiction of Arab sense-preference. This leads him to propose a basic contrast between the American privileging of sight and the Arabic privileging of hearing. This, in turn, he "translates" into a scholarly book chapter. Enter Ibrahim Muhawi who translates Kanaana's piece for an English-language readership. In addition, Muhawi opts to expand on his reading or "internal translating" of both Kanaana's argument and Dundes' initial article. Asserting the differential sensory privileging of Arab and American respectively, Muhawi goes far beyond Kanaana's suggestion that his thesis of a culturally variable "degree of

dependence on the various senses . . . is valid and merits serious investigation": Muhawi associates the sense of hearing with stagnation and the sense of sight with globalization.

While I would distance myself from the leap Muhawi chooses to make, perhaps such a provocation is indeed needed to foster interest in seriously researching the role of the senses in and between cultures. Central to such an investigation is, as I have argued elsewhere, ethnographic work (Bendix 2000)—but none of the three scholars implicated in the present piece claim to have done extensive ethnography to support his argument. Dundes' piece is based primarily on linguistic evidence: the selection of proverbs, phrases, and rhymes in American everyday speech does indeed point to an *ideological* privileging of the eye. Dundes does not, however, argue that Americans make better use of their eyes than their other senses. They simply profess, according to his text sample, greater trust in sight than in the other senses. We would need ethnographic documentation to truly understand how the different senses collaborate to bring about "belief" in American religious practices, just to take the proverb that also furnishes the title of Dundes' article. To what extent is "seeing" or "witnessing" a metaphor for a religious experience brought about by more than one sense, to what extent is the eye privileged? Of course, I am aware that Americans tend to use "Seeing is believing" outside the religious context. In terms of the arguments made, however, it is instructive to consider the religious context as a point of departure for ethnographies of sensory experience.

Kanaana assembles proverbial material that supports the hypothesis of a greater privileging of the ear in Arab discourse. Then he goes beyond the text-based only methodology employed by Dundes and brings in casual observances of practices relying on the ear rather than the eye, which he suggests might be probed more deeply. In this regard, I can only concur with Kanaana. His example of purchasing melons might serve as an example. Kanaana suggests that while Arabs will touch merchandise, "feel it with their hands, frequently even taste it" or seek to probe it for sound, when, for example, buying a watermelon, American shoppers, in Kanaana's assessment, will not do so, as the packaging interferes. Alas, America is a big country, just as the Arab world contains diverse cultures. There are plenty of farmer's markets in the USA, indeed, there is a renaissance of fresh produce markets in urban areas that do not submit to the "desensualization" entailed in the packaging described by Kanaana. I have witnessed many Americans of different social classes, ethnicities, and gender smelling, feeling, and shaking melons, tasting grapes, and pinching apricots. While there are shoppers submitting to the illusion of greater cleanliness, hygiene, and durability (which are, incidentally, the major cultural and ultimately legal reasons for packaging in the USA, not size) or the convenience and speed provided by packaged produce, there are others who for various reasons choose and weigh produce themselves. Produce markets in many corners of the globe arrange their wares to be a feast

for the eye, but what do we really know about the divergent cultural habits of relying on our complement of sensory skills to make a selection?

What should not be forgotten in ethnographic work on and with the senses is historical change. A view toward historical change would also preempt assumptions of unchanging cultural practices, as shimmers through Muhawi's final sentences (I would, however, strongly align myself with his depiction of the dilemma between identity and freedom entailed in the discourses about tradition). Research on the sense of hearing in European history, for example, offers ample evidence of the ear's superior place, for instance, in ancient Greek philosophy, medieval Christian ideology, and, briefly, pre-romantic and romantic aesthetics (Wagener 2003). Technological devices such as the walkman have, in addition, brought forth new listening practices across many societies and not exclusively in youth culture. Such historical transformations will surely also be in evidence in other culture areas. While I would caution against overly general suppositions concerning culture-specific privileging of one or another sense, the attention the senses ought to be given in cultural documentation and analysis arises out of this contribution by Sharif Kanaana and, by extension, Ibrahim Muhawi and Alan Dundes. Individual experience of the senses and cultural discourse about the senses are surely a central component of human experience, and Kanaana and Muhawi are to be commended for opening up a comparative discussion.

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